The Decolonization of Queer Politics in Suniti Namjoshi's Select Animal Fables: Locating "The Animal That Therefore I Am"

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Introduction

The contemporary crisis in humanism and critical theory entails a quest for newer ways to interrogate the discursively constructed category of the human. In the context of this, critical animal studies foreground newer ways of rethinking the meaning of humanism by dismantling the centrality of the category of the human as species sovereign. Hence, to think of the non-human animal is to decouple and delink the poetics of postcolonial pluralism from the category of the discursively constituted human and its attendant Western, Enlightenment-induced species sovereignty (Braidotti 13-32). Herein lies the intersection of gender studies and critical animal studies in their aligned concern with the exclusivist, biased and narrowly prejudiced Western discourses that have informed the construction of the category of the human. This hermeneutics of the human is narrowly ego-indexed and marginalizes not only other species but also those categories of the human that do not conform to its constituency of heteropatriarchal normative standards. In other words, such constituted categories of subhuman are consigned the status of an animalized humanity and all subjectivities of marginality belong to this paradigm (Wolfe 564-575). Traditionally speaking, queer and black subjectivities have been reduced to the arena of the animalized humans, (Haraway 1-15) and therefore to rethink gender in contemporary postcolonial parlance can be extrapolated to reimagine the rigid species boundaries between the human and the non-human animal – as beyond the "edge of the so-called human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than 'The Animal' or 'Animal Life' there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living..." (Derrida 31). Located in the interstices of such rigid boundaries of anthropocentrism, gender and species hierarchy is Derrida's "animot," "neither a species, nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals" (41). The genesis of a posthuman and post gender ontology is therefore located in this Derridean philosophy that reconfigures animal subjectivity beyond the narrow frontiers of the species sovereign human. In light of this, this article argues that Suniti Namjoshi envisages a post-gender world order by tethering her sensibilities to a posthumanist world-order where gender alterity is deeply imbricated with the "animot," wherein the anthropocentric epistemes of the species

sovereign gendered human is dismantled. The central objective of this article therefore, is to explore the intersection between postcolonial animal studies and rethinking the multiple exigencies of queer subjectivities in Suniti Namjoshi's anthology of revised animal fables, *Feminist Fables*.

Suniti Namjoshi and Postcolonial Intersectionalities

Suniti Namjoshi is the first openly lesbian Indian diasporic writer, a self-reflexive fabulist who retells both western and ancient Indian animal fables from a revisionist and revivalist stance. Her works include *Feminist Fables*, *The Blue Donkey Fables, The Conversations of Cow*, *Flesh and Paper*, *Because of India*, *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*, *The Mothers of Maya Diip*, *Saint Suniti and the Dragon*, *Building Babel*, and *Sycorax*. As an Indian-lesbian-feminist in a racist, white hegemonic world, adopting this genre of the revisionist fable is not only a political act of resistance but also affiliated to a project of decolonization of gender. As Harveen S. Mann corroborates:

> Committed to an egalitarian feminist politics, formulated and refined in the West, she disrupts the normative Hindu male discourse of India. A marginalized Hindu Indian in the racist social hierarchy of the U.S., Canada, and England, she brings an "altered perspective" to the Christian, Western history of ideas. A politicized lesbian feminist, she subverts both the male-centered humanism of the West and the androcentric hegemonic erotic ethos of India. (97-113)

Through a feminist revision of both Western and Eastern fabulous tales, Namjoshi destabilizes heterosexist literary genres which have systematically silenced and suppressed the voice of the queer 'other'. Furthermore, the politics of form and narrative strategy of Namjoshi's fables can be explored primarily because of their subversive potential. The choice of the animal fable as a predominant form is premised on the basis that the fables are one of the oldest narratives of culture that are loaded with heteropatriarchal prescriptive morals and values. Furthermore, this choice of reworking the animal fables like *Panchatantra* can also be contextualized within the cultural predilections towards queerness and homosexuality in India with its strong colonial inflections. Indian scholars of sexuality studies have pointed out that the Indian cultural toxicity towards homosexuality had a strong, colonialist legitimation. Heteronormative ideology of masculinity was one of the principal modalities that justified the colonial rule over Indian men by the British as has been pointed out by Uma Chakrarvarti: "The degeneracy of Hindu civilisation and the abject position of Hindu woman, requiring the protection and intervention of the colonial state, were two aspects of colonial politics. The third aspect was 'effeminacy' of the Hindu men who were unfit to rule themselves" (Chakravarti 22-30).

In this context, *The Intimate Enemy* by Ashish Nandy examines the delegitimating of Oscar Wilde's queer identity in the colonial context. For colonialism to be perpetuated, it was culturally imperative to glorify and romanticize the heteronormative ideology of masculinity of the British men as prescriptive. Pitted against this was the myth of the effeminacy of men who did not live up to such prescriptive standards of colonially defined gender ideology. In the Indian context, on the basis of a probing analysis of Pandey Bechan Sharma Ugra's *Chocolate and Other Stories* (1927), Ruth Vanita examines how there was a tendency in Indian culture to fashion a national identity predicated on a colonially prescriptive sexual character which mandatorily had to be heterosexual, monogamous, ultra-masculine, and procreative (Vanita 291). This cultural internalization of colonially induced homophobia led to the gay representations in these stories as a projection of a derogatory and effeminate picture of Indian men before British imperial powers posing a setback to the collective national struggle for independence. Hence, according to Ruth Vanita, there has been a cultural denial of any Indian roots for homosexuality, which has been thought of as a Western importation, whereas in reality as her works have established, it is homophobia that in actuality is a Western paradigm (Chanana 35-59).

In light of this, this article argues that by rewriting the animal fables that have been a significant part of the Indian cultural ethos and therefore would have furthered homophobia during the movement towards nation-building, Suniti Namjoshi debunks the very colonialist homophobic cultural anxieties reflected in the original fables. At the same time, Namjoshi also delegitimizes the epistemic value of these fables by rewriting them from a position of gender non-specificity. The very fluidity of form and genre is also a larger reflection of the fluidity of gender identity as envisaged by the writer. Interestingly, a feminist revisionist rewriting of the fables is also a reflexive attempt at fabulizing and fictionalizing the constitutive heteropatriarchal morals of gender. The fact that she chooses the fables to unravel gender or rather assign it a fictive, fabled status is also a strategy of postmodern reflexivity where she does not try to posit any oppositional fixed theory of selfhood against the narrow structures that define it. The fact that she too is telling us fables reinforces the idea that there can be multiple ways of reconfiguring gender alterity. While doing so, Namjoshi, this article argues, also offers a philosophical perspective on identity politics and identity as a site of gendering. Herein, philosophically, the gendering of identity is a matter of perception and representation and hence is often characterized by the fabula. Gender, as mediated through modes of representation, is nothing but the narratives and stories that a dominant culture wills into existence so that they become the organizing ontological principles for common humanity. Namjoshi's form of the fable therefore is an alternate mode of retelling, revisiting and rethinking gender through a strategy of defamiliarization of those established hegemonic modes of knowing.

Interestingly, deeply coeval with this liberatory feminist rewriting of the animal fables is also the representational modalities of the nonhuman animals and companion species. The fables have always been assigned the literary status of being subversive. Its subversion of anthropocentric ideologies and constitutive paradigms has been foregrounded by scholars such as Chris Danta:

> Animals are anthropomorphized in fables to expose human foibles and to lower our estimation of the human. Rather than lifting the human up out of the realm of biology, fables cast the human down by casting the human as an animal. The act of animal uplifting on the part of the fabulist thus serves an ironic purpose– and the fable challenges all modes of thought that seek to transcend the limits of biology or species. While the discourse of animal uplifting sanctifies the human as a quasi-theological agent able to transcend biology in the name of planetary stewardship, the fable de-sanctifies the human by reminding it of its biological destiny. (3)

However, this article makes a departure from such scholarship to argue that the animal in Suniti Namjoshi's fables does not only "de-sanctifies the human" (Danta 3). The animal is not a prop or a yardstick by which the humanity of the human is measured, rather it is an entity in its own right, a relational companion mediating the deeply coeval planetary socialities of the human and the nonhuman. In other words, the animal has a subjectivity and, in a Derridean strain, is a site of "heterogenous multiplicity" (31) that, in contesting narrow anthropocentrism, opens up an ethics of being in the world not as a normativized human but as a planetary entity. In doing so, this article argues that Namjoshi's animal fables are employed as a queer methodology to strategize ungendering as a posthumanist project un-humaning the putative human. The animal and the nonhuman question all ethics of embodiment to open up newer possibilities of disembodying gender. Animals and the nonhuman mediate this process and the methodology of queering. It has been argued that Namjoshi in unpacking gender roles and prescriptive norms through the trope of animals (Vanita 529-39), resists the human ways of configuring the discursive ideology of gender. She situates sexuality outside the anthropocentric frontiers and queerness is not pitted as an oppositional site of difference and dissidence, rather heterosexuality is fictionalized through the "trope" of animals. Although acceding to the merit of such readings, this article makes a departure from thinking of the animal in Namjoshi's fables as a "trope," circling back to an anthropocentric optics. In a contrarian argument, this paper thinks of the animal presence in Namjoshi as evidential of an ethical entanglement with humanitarian concerns as gender alterity. Animal ontology thus is a pathway towards an ethical way of being in the world where any scrutiny of anthropocentric axiomatics as gendering of identity must be thought with animal subjectivity in sight.

The Intersection of Animal Studies and a Posthumanist Optics

Animal studies is a shared space between the natural sciences and cultural studies. Given the impetus by the natural sciences, animal studies focus on the animal by differentiating it from the realm of human worlds (Marvin and McHugh 3). In terms of cultural critique, animal studies are deeply rooted in the imperatives of ethics and emerged from the need for a cultural visibility to the commitment "to animal liberation and veganism, with activist links to other social justice movements" (Pick and Naraway 3). The contemporary context has witnessed a paradigm shift from these originary impulses as scholars have engaged in a robust discussion about the terminology and descriptive appellations applicable to this emerging appendage of postcolonial scholarship. Derrida's book *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and his essay "Eating Well" have given impetus to the birth of critical animal studies. Derrida was uncomfortable with both the singular and plural forms of the term "animal" when applied to "an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals" (369-418). He coined the term "animot" to draw attention to how animal multiplicity debunks the problematics of human-animal binaries. His formulation of the "crossing of borders between man and animal is an appeal to make an interdisciplinary crossing between philosophy and the sciences" is affiliated with the political agenda of reimagining a posthumanist relationality between subjectivity, species and signification. In his seminal book, *The Animal that Therefore I Am,* Derrida deconstructs the logocentrism of thinking as an evaluative marker of the Cartesian human. As a stark philosophical retort to Cartesian egotism, he reconfigures a non-anthropocentric ethics of thinking not as a site that mediates the logocentric singularity of being human but as a site that should mediate an inclusive ethics of being with the animal and assigning the animal a sentient subjectivity. Questioning the Cartesian premise of Enlightenment, Derrida says – "The animal looks at us and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there" (Derrida 29). For Derrida, therefore, the anthropocentric singularity of "thinking" in the history of Western metaphysics has problematically consolidated the "human" and this needs to be dismantled to realize that "thinking" must reinscribe the subject in a compassionate relationality with the animal – "The two centuries I have been referring to somewhat casually in order to situate the present in terms of this tradition have been those of an unequal struggle, a war (whose inequality could one day be reversed) being waged between, on the one hand, those who violate not only animal life but even and also this sentiment of compassion, and, on the other hand, those who appeal for an irrefutable testimony to this pity" (Derrida 28).

In the essay "Eating Well," Derrida has coined a very interesting word, "carno-phallogocentrism" to locate the practice of eating meat in a masculinist culture where eating meat, the phallus, and the primacy of the logos are exigently bound together in the production of the human subject (Adams & Calarco 31-53). It is this imaginary which underlies the

anthropocentric egotism the corollary of which is species hierarchy. Derrida's works on species hierarchy has been a major impetus for some of the most significant contemporary animal studies thinkers. The two feminist posthumanist thinkers probing the boundaries of species sovereignty are Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti according to whom the very poetics of a feminist postmodern pluralism should delegitimize the centrality of the androcentric human through reimagining animal subjectivity and multiplicity. Rosi Braidotti reconceptualizes animal agency in claiming the role that nonhuman animals and companion species play in enriching the biosocial network where human beings and animal beings both deeply gain through their individuated sociality (Braidotti 13-32). Donna Haraway goes on to emphasize this idea in *Primate Vision: Gender, Race and Nature,* where she makes a case for decoding "behavioural semiotics when species meet" (25-50). She offers that interspecies entanglement can be a significant space for not only opening up spaces of empathy but also to bring about a renewed understanding of the human itself, thus assigning an epistemological imperative to nonhuman animals.

In the current polemical scholarship on animal studies, there is a debate on the most appropriate usage of terminology as well as the appropriate approaches to rethinking animal ontology. This ongoing debate is suggestive of an ever-shifting fluctuant imaginary of a decentered and desubjectivized human. In this wide spectrum of scholarly and philosophical thoughts on the human and animal bio-entanglements, certain scholars have focused on the biosocial dimension where as human species we should never lose sight of the fact that we co-exist with animals in an entangled biological nexus. This can be corroborated by what Garry Marvin and Susan McHugh have pointed out in their deployment of the term human-animal studies, emphasizing a bio-social imbrication indicated by the hyphen between human and animal to foreground

> a linking, the 'together in one' … which is to study animals with humans, and humans with animals, never forgetting that we are both animals in general and humans in particular (Marvin & McHugh 2).

In a slightly contrarian spirit, Michael Lundblad makes a shift away from this bio-social dimension of animal studies to redirect our attention to the discursive nature of animal ontology from a cultural perspective. In his introduction to *Animalities*, Michael Lundblad marks a distinction between human-animal studies as reflected in McHugh's work and what he calls animality studies, and posthumanism as pioneered especially by the works of Cary Wolfe. This differential paradigm of "animality studies" opens up the perimeter of scholarship a little further to look beyond superfluous engagement with the animal in the sense of just advocating a moral ethical position to that of "liking animals." On the contrary, animality studies focus on discursive "constructions of humans as animals or discourses of animality in relationship to human cultural politics"

(Lundblad 3). In literary and cultural studies, the focus of animality studies would be on "texts and discourses with humans likened to animals, or humans with animal characteristics, or humans oppressed like animals, or animals signifying humans" (Lundblad 3). In other words, animality studies open up political debates not just on thinking about the human-animal entanglement but also scrutinize cultural constructions of animal ontology as perceived from a monohumanist standpoint. In this sense, animality studies very significantly are predicated on the affiliations between animals and animalized species to critique phenomena of different forms of animalization as part of species sovereignty. Lundblad therefore connects this approach to the trajectories of "species critique" as an emerging facet of postcolonial and ethnic studies. However, he also forewarns that we should not think of "species" and its corollary, speciesism as yet another elevated identity category. He further elaborates that "the emphasis in animality studies remains more on discursive constructions of animalities in relation to human and nonhuman animals" (11). It is this literary ethical imperative of critique of all discursive phenomena of different forms of animalization as part of species sovereignty, which is the core focus of this article in reading Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables.*

Animal Interiority and Representational Modalities

In light of the abovementioned arguments, this paper explores three key representational modalities of animal and nonhuman interiority in Suniti Namjoshi's works. These representational paradigms foreground the decolonization of queer politics by delinking queer politics from its concomitant anthropocentric imbrications. A decolonial re-configuration of queer in Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables* therefore makes a departure from anthropocentric concerns and aligns more with non-human registers. Queering, therefore, has a lot of political potential as a hybrid methodology born at the interstices of critical animal studies and gender studies, amongst other disciplines. Attendant with this is a probing of what constitutes a normative human fueled by "exclusionary conceptions" (Butler xv).

The first mode gains impetus from imagining animals and the nonhuman beyond the hierarchy of metaphorization – traditional literary imagination has always placed animals within the confines of metaphors and allegories. As animal studies scholars have professed, animality should not be read as a site of metaphorical or allegorical representations; rather it should open up dialogues with alternative non-anthropocentric ways of being in the world (Sinha & Baishya 3-6), as a way forward towards species inclusivity as well as an ethical relationality with the non-normativized as Derrida would have it. Namjoshi's fables are populated with a one-eyed monkey, a blue donkey, Saurian lizards, and lesbian cows. However, it is interesting to note that rather than metaphorizing animals, Namjoshi's texts ironically subvert the anthropomorphic tenets of

the traditional fables. This is a mode of representation that projects the animals' difference and distance from the human by generating a radical "un-humaning of animals" that disparages anthropocentric identifications and metaphorization (Bruns 703-720). This is evident in the *Blue Donkey Fables* (2012), where the blueness of the donkey is a marker of its difference as well as its being. When berated by other donkeys, "Your blueness troubles us," the donkey looks surprised and responds – "I'm a perfectly good donkey" (Namjoshi 90). At the end of the fable, Namjoshi writes about the blue donkey:

> "And so they did; they looked and argued and squabbled and argued and after a while most of them got used to the blueness of the donkey and didn't notice it any more. But a few remained who maintained strongly that blueness was inherent, and a few protested that it was essentially intentional. And there were still a few others who managed to see—though only sometimes—that the Blue Donkey was only herself and therefore beautiful." (Namjoshi 17)

The blueness of the donkey foregrounds its becoming-animal and is a marker of the donkey's constitutive subjectivity. Beyond the realm of metaphors, textually agentive animals like the blue donkey open up fluid domains of signification, inviting the human reader to subjective notions of identification with animals. It is the animal that has the agency to actuate alternative ways of thinking about difference and ontological alterity.

Animal ontology in such texts as Namjoshi's therefore continues to reinforce the limitedness of the modalities that shape narrowly human ways of looking at the world. Blueness does not metaphorize the donkey, rather, it is an invitation to reading blueness as a site of differential and heterogenous being-ness. This is not only limited to rethinking gender or sexual alterity but is extended to include rethinking caste politics. In the Indian context, the color blue is replete with signification of caste politics. It is a color that is at the center of Dalit politics and carries Ambedkarite intonations. B.R. Ambedkar's iconic blue suit became one of the main reasons Dalits adopted the blue flag. Blue, as the color of the sky in Dalit parlance, therefore, stands for universal humanity and represents non-discrimination. Under the universal blue sky, everyone is believed to be equal. The most significant contribution of postcolonial animal studies lies in the production of incisive, politically informed, culture-specific local histories and sensibilities informing the representation of animals (Armstrong 416). Herein lies the representational axiomatics of the blue donkey. The animal therefore that we are, as Derrida has reflected, is a relentless reminder of such ethical imbrications and entanglements with identitarian politics as mediated by the nonhuman animal. Thinking with the animal, hence, should posit ontological difference at the center of all politics. Derrida's reflections about ethics in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* are therefore about an ethics of being – the blue donkey's self-assertive identity-reclamation about being a perfectly good donkey is

therefore an apprenticeship in ethics of being about inclusivity of differential identities and alterities of being.

The hermeneutics that make up the narrow frontiers of human ontology like identity, language, race and gender are perpetually decentered in *Feminist Fables* as nonhuman alterity opens up alternate ethical optics of thinking about gender, sexuality and identity beyond its anthropocentric constructions. In stories like "The Princess," the Princess is a signifier of an existence marked by privileges and entitlements that she has been cossetted into by her royal parents who make the society of lowly humans erect an exclusionary world of permissible subjects:

> She was very beautiful and exceptionally charming, and, of course, her sensitivity was such that it was absolutely amazing. If anyone cried, she would suffer so much that no one was allowed to cry in the palace. If anyone was hurt, she would take to her bed and be ill for weeks. In consequence, no one who was hurt was admitted within. Sickness sickened her, and she could not bear to see anything that was in the least bit ugly. Only good-looking people and those in good health were allowed to be seen. The king, her father, and the queen, her mother, did their best for her, and the people of the city were quite proud of her—she being a princess and the genuine thing … (Namjoshi 14)

However, *The Princess* is an ironic story as ultimately the princess dies a victim of her own exclusive maladies and subverts the normate embodied by "the Princess" who is actually disabled by the inexplicable malady of what is characterized by Namjoshi as "her sensitivity" (14). The story is a stark reminder of how often hegemonic regimes erect their own arena of permissible and exclusionary normative ideologies of beauty, health and identity. This idea can be further corroborated by a reading of the short story, "The Ugly One," where we are told that the ugly creature has an indeterminate sex but an anthropocentric regime believes it to have been a woman. Once again, the non-normativity of this nonhuman creature is associated with aberrations and monstrous deviances:

> Once upon a time there was an extraordinarily ugly creature. It dribbled; snot leaked from its nose, wax from its ears, and excrement clung to its tattered clothing. Its sex was indeterminate, but after its death people generally agreed that it had once been a woman. The creature was not unique, nor exceptional in any way: at birth, for example, there hadn't been a trace of any congenital defect. But, as time went on, she had tended to generate such extremes of disgust that, wholly without effort, she had, in the end, acquired a certain status. For doctors and psychiatrists, she was the Unhealthy Aberration. (Namjoshi 15)

This story is a parodic subversion of an anthropocentric culture that assigns an abjection and debasement with impunity to queer subjectivities like the "Ugly One." The affective registers of disgust legitimize the abject status of the queer, the "Ugly One." The very interesting explorations of the politics of the "indeterminate sex" and the

medicalization of the nonhuman creature's ontology raise very interesting questions about embodiment. The straddling of the ugly one of both human and nonhuman worlds, of both health (as not having any congenital defect) and what is perceived as unhealthy legitimizes queering of the nonhuman as a politics of subversion. The befuddling of the boundaries between the human and the non-human significantly intervenes in rethinking not only the discursive registers that have defined the human but also ethics and embodiment. Jeffrey Cohen's significant book, *Medieval Identity Machine,* debates the way embodiment has always been thought of as a signifier of the heteronormative human. For Cohen, "The body is not human (or at least, it is not only human)"; neither, he insists, "is it inhabited by an identity or sexuality that is unique to or even contained fully within the flesh" (41). Inherent in queer theorizing according to Cohen is a challenge to anthropocentrism and humanism. Hence, queering as a posthumanist literary methodology is being employed by Suniti Namjoshi in order to unpack and disembody gender through dismantling reductive definitions assigned to embodiment by a heteronormative order.

Zoomorphism and Animal Ontology

The second tenet of representation in *Feminist Fables* is prioritizing zoomorphism as opposed to anthropomorphism. In speaking from a position of gender non-specificity in a few of her short stories in *Feminist Fable* and novellas like *The Conversations of Cow* (2012), there is a tension between anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. Whereas anthropomorphism is predicated on the universal human proclivity to look at the world in terms of human attributes, zoomorphism is a reversal of this tendency. Renowned scholar of Hinduism, Wendy Doniger, in her exploration of ancient Indian Sanskrit texts, looks at the duality of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic tendencies in them. In the ancient animal fables, anthropomorphism in imagining the lion as King, focuses on the human paradigms of the King and the animal lion fades in significance. In other words, animals are humanized to further exalt the supremacy of the human as the humanized animal loses its animal subjectivity to mimic exalted human characteristics. Zoomorphism, on the contrary, in its animalization of the human is about the dynamic animal interiority and subjectivity (7-15). In many Hindu myths, deities, gods and goddesses mediate their divinity through animal forms. Hence, Vishnu's Garuda (eagle), Shiva's bull (Nandi) reinforce a zoomorphic exaltation of the animal form as these deities can take the shape of these animals and are facilitated by their companionship as vehicular forms (Doniger 7-15). Moreover, zoomorphism in Hindu texts in delineating fluidity between human-animal embodiments, also intersects with ideas of sexuality as Gods take animal forms in order to test human resilience. Hence, this fluidity of ontological embodiment raises deeper philosophical issues about identity, karma and reincarnation. Predicated on these fluidities of

ontological boundaries in Hindu theology, Namjoshi's zoomorphic humans offer interesting boundary-defying queering of gender and differential identities. From a theological register of human-animal entanglement, Namjoshi's zoomorphic humans accrue in multiple subject positions to rethink marginal subjectivities. The zoomorphic humans thus become a site of contestation of rigidly anthropocentric modes of representing queer (Cohen 41-50) and other marginalized subject positions. Zoomorphism therefore becomes a tool of decolonizing queer ontologies. In the short story, "A Moral Tale," which is a revisionist tale of Beauty and the Beast, it is a queer woman who is the beast. The story is an interesting subversion of queer as monstrous. Instead of the traditional anthropomorphizing of the beast as a human prince, Namjoshi dismantles such transfigurations of the animal into the human and instead invites us to think about how certain non-normative subject-positions are thought of in terms of the animal and the monstrous beast:

> I know what is wrong: I am not human. The only story that fits me at all is the one about the Beast. But the Beast doesn't change from a Beast to a human because of its love. It's just the reverse. And the Beast isn't fierce. It's extremely gentle. It loves Beauty, but it lives alone and dies alone.' And that's what she did. Her parents mourned her, and the neighbours were sorry, particularly for her parents, but no one was at fault: she had been warned and she hadn't listened. (Namjoshi 17)

"A Moral Tale" is a story that interestingly pulverizes anthropomorphic world orders that gender identities and assign negative meanings to such subjectivities. The beast (certain animalized subjectivities, as queer), as Namjoshi tells us, does not romantically transform into a human form (normative markers that define what it means to be a human) because of its love for beauty; rather it remains a beast and dies a lonely death primarily because of its impermissible love for beauty, decreed by hegemonic social orders. Zoomorphism therefore is an ethical rethinking of subject positions in a Derridean sense, which are relegated to a status of animalized humans not in any reflection of Hindu theological registers but in submission to normatively ordered social registers of gender and identity.

Another dimension of zoomorphism can be noted in *The Conversations of Cow,* one of the most significant works by Namjoshi. In the preface to *The Conversations of Cow*, Namjoshi writes:

> In addition, I had a logical difficulty with both women's liberation and gay liberation. Questioning gender stereotyping was a central tenet. But if I questioned gender stereotyping, then labelling various groups 'men,' 'women,' 'heterosexual,' 'homosexual,' didn't make good sense. It's true that politics often requires simplification, and that a certain amount of generalisation is inevitable in that language has nouns, but I was uncomfortable with it, and particularly with the notion of a rigid identity. (*Cow* Preface)

The above-mentioned lines further justify the representation of animals in *Feminist Fables.* Animals are a way of superseding the limitations of language. Animals are therefore a site of contesting linguistic figurations of identity. An ethical corollary of questioning gender stereotyping beyond the rigid frameworks of language is mediated through animal epistemes. In texts like *The Conversations of Cow*, there is no simple narrative resolution as a fine tension exists between anthropomorphism and zoomorphism as modes of representation. Suniti Namjoshi herself is imagined as a lesbian cow in a relationship with Bhadravati, her Brahmini paramour. Fashioned as a fable, there are significant discursive narratives of gender, race, caste and class that *Cow* debunks and delegitimizes by constantly assigning to these discourses the status of the fictive by virtue of being produced by anthropocentric constructions of language. This is also a subversive act of dismantling anthropocentric frontiers like language, whereby zoomorphic humans like Suniti and Bhadravati become the loci of ungendered semiotics of language. The animal lesbian subjects politically disentangle language from its casteist and gendered inflections. In typical Hindu linguistic registers, the cow is attributed Brahmanical meanings. However, in *The Conversations of Cow,* zoomorphism dismantles such linguistic baggage and foregrounds a non-linguistic mediation of gender and identity.

> It seemed to me at one time that everyone in the west thought that absolutely everyone was engaged in a quest for identity and that that could be seen as the theme of every single book. It's difficult for someone with a Hindu background not to think of identity as, to some degree, arbitrary. Even the crudest version of the promotion/ demotion racket—you are who you are in accordance with how well or badly you did in your last life— suggests that. And we're told as children— whether we understand it or not is another matter— that the ultimate aim is not to achieve a particular identity, but to divest ourselves of the particulars of identity. (*Cow* Preface)

This narrowly ego-indexed notion of identity as an anthropocentric quest is dismantled as the animalized humans are situated beyond such overdetermined human arenas of thinking about the self. Through such a fluid narrative mode of animalizing humans more than humanizing animals, Namjoshi recuperates lesbianism from being mediated through rigid and bifurcative linguistic labels as 'men,' 'women,' 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual'.

> What she finds hard to cope with in consequence are the metamorphoses that Bhadravati, the cow of a thousand wishes, goes through: from cow, to Baddy (a sexist pig of a creature) to beautiful B (with whom Suniti falls in love), to Bud who annoys her by taking charge, to S2 (a duplicate of Suniti, with whom Suniti does not get along), and back to cow grazing in the summer sun. As cow changes, Suniti changes too, until at the close, she's content to be someone and no one. (*Cow* Preface)

Zoomorphism posits a powerful representational episteme whereby queer subjectivity is mediated beyond the anthropocentric modalities of language and literary forms. This Derridean ethical negotiation with identity as "someone and no one" is to think of identity beyond particularizing one's human embodiment through language, as Derrida believes that the very act of naming oneself as human and the other as animal is an act of linguistic violence (47-55).

Upending Cultural Constructions of Animal Ontology

The third mode of representation of nonhuman animals opens up a dimension of Michael Lundblad's animality studies by Namjoshi's upending of culturally constructed discourses of animal ontology. In other words, animality studies as discussed earlier in the article, open up ethical and political debates not just in thinking about the human-animal entanglement in fables but also in critically advancing a critique of the phenomena of different forms of animalization of differential subjectivities as part of species exceptionalism. As part of this project of decentering species exceptionalism, Animality studies invite readers to rethink socialities and affective relationalities with the nonhuman other as an ethics of being.

In *The Conversations of Cow*, time and again, this invitation to an affective relationality with the nonhuman animal is reinforced when the cows, irrespective of their human names, are simply referred to as "Cow" to mark the transition of an anthropocentric egotism towards species egalitarianism and to think of the animal not in terms of the human but as a unified autonomous being. The idea of vegetarianism is explored to foreground species egalitarianism. In one of the dinner conversations, the talk veers around Kate wondering if the flesh of the frozen mammoth was still fresh to which Suniti takes offense:

> Now surely there will be a row. Don't they realise that Cow is an animal? My palms are clammy. I feel a little sick. By the time I recover, Cow and Kate are happily discussing mutual consent: whether it's all right to eat meat if there's mutual consent between eater and eaten. The others are listening with smiles of amusement. (Namjoshi 74)

The idea of consent between the eater and the eaten is an important thought around animal rights and ethics. This textual instance is a further reminder of Derrida's carno-phallogocentrism, where the logocentrism of the human is constituted by the human's untrammelled right to consume other animals. Namjoshi opens up spaces where thoughts of bio-egalitarianism is to keep sight of shared ontological registers between the human and the non-human animal as species of the same planet; spaces that make an effort to remind humanity about its being with the animal by investing the animal with an agency and thinking of it as a creature with the right to consent.

A kind of bio-egalitarianism is further envisioned when all animalized creatures of marginality such as lesbians and animals and animals with disability are coeval on one singular ontological plane. Bhadravati persistently upholds her identity as a lesbian cow

> 'I ought to tell you,' Cow informs me, 'that this is a Self-Sustaining Community of Lesbian Cows.' I scrutinise Cow. So, Cow and I have something in common. The largest cow says 'Hello' to us. 'I ought to tell you …' she begins. 'Yes, I know,' I say. Have to watch these interruptions. But let's get on with it. 'How do you manage about children?' 'AI.' Well, there's brevity. 'What about property rights?' 'We're fighting it in the law courts.' 'How,' I begin—how not to be rude? — 'How did you acquire the land in the first place?' 'Willed. Once upon a time there was a strong-minded lesbian who was determined to leave her all to A Good Cause.' This is cow number two. (*Cow* 65)

Once again, the community of lesbian cows becomes a significant site of rights-based lexicon of lesbianism. The fact that lesbian identities are marginalized is predominantly because human rights as the right to parenting, property and a legal citizen-subjecthood are denied to them. A corollary of this is the animalization of their being by relegating them outside the constitutive perimeter of legal status and legal citizenship. Principally aligned with postcolonial animalities, *The Conversations of Cow* foregrounds the fact that bio-egalitarianism can only be made possible by newer modalities of affective relationalities with the nonhuman animal as also with the animalized queer subject. This representational mode influenced by animality studies furthers a posthuman reconfiguration of queer as a legal status. Their singular vitality extends beyond anthropomorphic or allegorical modes of description and opens up bio-political perspectives within and across regimes of knowledge and empathy.

> 'That cow is a citizen of planet earth. If you throw us out, I shall complain about you to the Human Rights Commission.' (*Cow* 65)

This sentence is a powerful reminder of the ethics of being as a shared space of legal rights. In other words, the animals in Namjoshi's works scrutinize a narrowly "carno-phallogocentric" world order.

The short work "Saint Suniti and the Dragon," found in the author's fabulist collection of the same name, is a revisionist tale from a queer and non-anthropocentric standpoint. The retelling upends a Western canonical myth, that of an anointed hero's quest for the meaning of life and identity. This identity quest motif is at the center of all Western anthropocentric Enlightenment narratives. The story here in Namjoshi's text is reversed where the journey of the aspiring hero St. Suniti is detailed and satirizes Beowulf and the legend of "St. George and the Dragon." Namjoshi's revisionist queer politics entails a deep scrutiny of preceding anthropocentric as well as masculinist identity politics represented in the Western as well as Indian literary traditions. Subverting such traditions, she invests the queer subject, Saint Suniti and the non-human creature, the

dragon, with epistemic and moral authority – sources of knowledge and power. Scrutinizing the metaphoric accrual of the dragon as the evil other, the vanquishing of which cements the Western hero's masculinity, Namjoshi's dragon is depicted as a traveling companion of Saint Suniti's. This retelling further debunks the latent masculinist violence underscoring traditional hero-quest stories where a violent slaying of the dragon is a masculine imperative. Here, Saint Suniti and the dragon coexist in an affective bio-egalitarianism where, through respectful conversation, Saint Suniti learns about wisdom and resilience from the dragon. Animal subjectivity and alternate modes of existence through affective solidarities with the imagined and putative other underlines this powerfully retold fable – "the would-be saint is trying to face her fear. She hasn't yet realised clearly that many of these devils and dragons are internal" (Namjoshi 143).

> 'Perhaps fear is unkillable,' she announced ponderously. 'Perhaps it's a mythical and immortal beast.' Perhaps—and with this thought her heart rose—perhaps this quest is a failed quest, and it is not my duty, much less my aim, to attempt to kill it. She glanced at the dragon lying at her feet. And then, in a flash, saw herself standing there, at the foot of the dragon, puzzled and puny. Perhaps fear is only a large animal … Even so, it did not follow that she had to kill it. (Namjoshi 146)

In a contrarian spirit she explores the postmodern impulse to consider identity as a subjective experience from non-anthropocentric frameworks. In so doing, she deconstructs Eurocentric notions of canonical character archetypes while suggesting that "identity politics must involve a multiplicity of archetypes – that is, the self is seldom archetypal in the singular, but rather an amorphous and discontinuous series of mythic archetypes" (Breiter Preface).

Conclusion

The subversive power of postcolonial animality as a queer methodology in Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables* therefore debunks all familiar cultural paradigms of thinking about the animal and the animalized other. Animals and the nonhuman creatures in their unified and absolutely individuated selves disparage the self-assigned avowed status of the human. In other words, this heterogenous multitude that constitutes animal ontology is an ethical way forward to thinking with the animals and the animalized other. The epistemic authority of the literary animals imbricates with an ethical negotiation with differential identities underlying the cultural invisibilization of the disabled, disfigured and marginal. This is in keeping with the fact that minoritized identity discourses should be the loci of foregrounding "species theorising" (Ahuja 557) that helps in decentering privileged ontological sites of analysis to examine multispecies entanglements. To conclude, Suniti Namjoshi's narrative modes of decolonization of gender politics through foregrounding human-animal

sociality thus become "a space for political accountability" (Haraway 149-181) delineating ontological ambiguities and multiplicities located in postcolonial affinities. Foregrounding a sensibility affiliated to posthumanism and post-genderism, the phenomenon of "Un-becoming human," this article concludes, is deeply imbricated with the process of un-becoming gender through a displacement of all frontiers of the human. In locating *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, this article concludes that any decolonial politics should begin with Suniti Namjoshi's works that contest the monolithic accruals of the human not as a unified logocentrism but as relational and affectively emplaced in a planetary way of being in the world.

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